**Extended Essay English A1**

How is the initial connection between Amir and Hassan maintained and changed throughout Khaled Hosseini’s “The Kite Runner”?

Do Hee Chung  
Candidate Number:   
Center Number:   
British International School Vietnam   
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**Table of Contents:**

# Abstract…….......................................................................................3

# Introduction......................................................................................4

# Main body...........................................................................................5

# Conclusion.......................................................................................15

# Bibliography.....................................................................................17

**Abstract**

Within “The Kite Runner”, Khaled Hosseini describes that “there was a brotherhood between people who fed from the same breast, a kinship that not even time could break”[[1]](#footnote-1). The aim of this essay therefore involved an exploration of this initial connection between Amir and Hassan and how it is maintained and changed through the novel.

The theme of brotherhood appealed to me throughout “The Kite Runner” as I questioned if a complex childhood bond could actually be maintained through adulthood and how it could both mold and break the protagonist; the exploration of brotherhood is further elaborated in the introduction.

The investigation was primarily conducted by reading Hosseini’s novels, The Kite Runner and A Thousand Splendid Suns, to gain understanding of Hosseini’s style and intentions of writing. I then narrowed down my scope to focus solely on “The Kite Runner” and examined Hosseini’s most effective literary techniques. Secondary resources such as literary blogs and critic reviews were then used to challenge my arguments on these techniques.

I discovered that Hosseini incorporated four key literary techniques to portray the “initial connection” to the reader: cultural context, characterisation, motif, structure in which all of these are discussed in the essay.

The essay concluded that Hosseini’s use of characterization most effectively developed the bond between Amir and Hassan by manipulating the emotional response of the reader; the other techniques strengthened the presence of the brotherhood throughout the novel. The bond may be maintained, changed, or become meaningless throughout the novel, but perhaps it is up to the reader to reflect upon the purpose of the brotherhood’s persistence. Hosseini does not solely intend to use the theme of brotherhood to structure the novel around Amir’s attainment of catharsis, but to simply embrace the positive and negative connotations of the never-fading connection.

[297 words]

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**Introduction**

Brotherhood, as it can be commonly accepted, is a type of bond between two male counterparts of any age. Its kinship often holds value above friendship, and onto a level of deep emotional and perhaps spiritual connection that causes the two “brothers” to associate themselves as one rather than two bodies. Aristophanes, the Greek playwright and philosopher, claimed that “each of us when separated, having one side only…is always looking for his other half”2. This kinship is significant because it is mirrored regularly in the Islamic culture where “platonic male bonds (are)…prioritize(d)[[2]](#footnote-2)3“ to an extent that “male-to-male relationships are portrayed as the most sacred”3. However, it is this very bond that can cause one to commit regrettable deeds, trapping oneself in a sinful past through separation from one’s “other half”, as Hosseini suggests in “The Kite Runner”. The above question is important because the novel is mainly structured around the relationship between a Pashtun and a Hazara, a wealthy master and his servant, Amir and Hassan. Through the juxtaposition of the growing unrest of the soon-to-be war ridden Afghanistan and Amir’s pivotal decision to sever all links with his childhood friend, Hosseini relates the events of a global political unrest to an allegorical representation: an overlooked friendship between two boys amidst a chaotic backdrop. Hosseini’s technique of “describing moments of slow, silent agony”4 is presented to the reader as Amir’s judgment leads to a life of shame and regret, as shown by Hosseini’s continual mention of Hassan in Amir’s conscience throughout his adolescence. Readers are given the impression that the relationship becomes distorted throughout the novel, but mended when Amir “redeems” his past mistakes through a violent encounter with Hassan’s rapist, Assef, after Hassan’s death. However, one skeptically questions how Amir’s character can ever achieve true atonement if his “other half” is no longer present. Amir is unable to truly forgive himself as a whole if Hassan is not alive, as Hassan is, through an Aristophanic outlook, part of Amir. How can a relationship recover if part of it is forever lost?

**Body**

Hosseini’s incorporation of ethnic context, while not the most significant technique, introduces the immediate, yet complex bond between Amir and Hassan- the politically dominant Pashtuns and the lower-class Hazaras, and the almost tragic fate of their kinship. Throughout Afghan history, the Pashtuns h(eld) the highest influential rank above other ethnic groups, specifically the Hazaras5; Hosseini connects this unbalanced ethnic relationship with that of the boys’ after Amir finds an ethnic history book, learning that “…the Pashtuns…had persecuted and oppressed the Hazaras.”[[3]](#footnote-3)6 By establishing a historical background in the novel’s beginning, Hosseini uses the past to foreshadow the future of Amir and Hassan’s doomed relationship, adding an element of predictability to the boys’ personal tragedies later in the novel. By using a representation in microcosm to embody the two ethnic groups of the two boys, Hosseini suggests that the friendship is limited and cannot move past the conflict that had occurred in the violent connection between the Pashtuns and the Hazaras. Their relationship is destined for interminable inequality in class and character (one the master, one the outcast) due to the differing ranks of the ethnic groups that the two boys have been helplessly categorised in before birth. Hosseini has situated this classification of the two boys in the start of the novel to suggest that their connection is fated for dissonance, and, through knowledge of the Hazara massacre7[[4]](#footnote-4), death. However, it can be interpreted that the bond *is* reestablished through Amir’s successful rescuing of Hassan, implying that the brotherhood *can* transcend the historical and cultural background representing the two boys.

Hosseini does not explicitly expand upon the hopelessness of the boys’ relationship as his ambiguous attitude towards religion describes the brotherhood as superficially divine. During the novel, Amir is not devoted to religion until Sohrab, the future son of Hassan, cuts himself in the bath and is rushed to the emergency room. Through desperation, Amir grabs a white mat from the hospital storage room and uses it as a “prayer rug”8. The next paragraph is constructed as an ongoing “prayer”, or begging for Sohrab’s recovery. Hosseini creates a connection between Amir and Hassan through *namaz* (Muslim prayer) as Amir’s “hands are stained with the Hassan’s blood”9 and now “the blood of his boy too”9. Readers relate the *namaz* to that done by Hassan every day during Amir’s childhood and therefore infer that Hosseini symbolically uses religion as a tool to connect Hassan and Amir through a divine medium, suggesting that the brotherhood itself is spiritual and cannot be broken due to its holy intangibility; the diction of “blood” hints that Amir will forever have Hassan’s blood on him and therefore Hassan will always be with Amir. However, religion’s use as a tool also becomes a means to simply avoid losing any evidence of Hassan’s existence through his son, corroborated by the repetition of “God”9 in Amir’s “prayer”. After the word is continuously chanted, readers sense that the meaning in “God” becomes desperate and pleading, as Amir uses religion in vain only to “turn to Him now in (Amir’s) hour of need”9. Hosseini illustrates Amir’s desperate use of prayer to suggest that religion is not the best medium for redemption; instead, Hosseini implies that the broken bond should be atoned through practical means such as Amir’s journey to Afghanistan and rescue of Hassan, both actions that have eventually proved to be successful steps towards a self-rehabilitation and a mending of the brotherhood.

While Amir’s character ultimately seeks atonement from the broken brotherhood, Hosseini still stresses the bond’s omnipresence as the relationship between the two boys is paralleled in the connection among other characters; as a result, readers feel as though every aspect of the novel strengthens Amir and Hassan’s brotherhood. A foil to Hassan, the antagonist Assef is used as an empty cipher to fill with Amir’s fears and sinful thoughts, so Amir does not have to fully face the pain of his actions on his own, thereby suggesting that Amir is too cowardly to maintain his broken relationship with Hassan. Hosseini describes both Assef and Hassan as total opposites: Hassan is “incapable of hurting anyone”10[[5]](#footnote-5)while Assef earns a “reputation for savagery”11 as a “sociopath”11. Hosseini uses such contrasting characterization to form a connection between Assef and Hassan in that both characters are exaggerations. Hosseini manipulates the reader to feel sympathy for Amir’s feelings of such love for Hassan while having to deal with the beastly, almost inhumane Assef in isolation. However, Assef’s exaggerated characterization is a projection of Amir’s centre of consciousness, or a selfish coping mechanism to distance himself from the evil he has committed, and transfer it into another, so the protagonist, Amir is not seen as evil. In that way, every injury Assef suffers—every “scream”, “blood ooz(e)”12— is also an injury to the evil Assef represents, and therefore an emotional catharsis for Amir, or a moment of “clarity”12. However, readers realize that Hosseini presents irony in that this catharsis is actually false; the true malevolent spirit originates from Amir, so the punishment is not inflicted on the true culprit. None of the unresolved guilt is erased, but suppressed. Therefore Amir cannot emotionally rest, as it “hurts to breathe”; the character cannot “breathe” easy or let go of his sins and corresponding guilt. Hosseini underscores this notion near the end of the novel when Amir meets Assef as an adult, hinting that this representation of evil has never faded, much like how Amir and Hassan’s connection is never forgotten throughout the novel, shown through the last chapter’s repetition of Hassan’s “For you a thousand times over” verbalized by Amir. At this late point, Assef accomplishes many violent feats in which he now holds a high ranking position amongst the Taliban terrorist group, “the tall Talib in white….wearing his dark John Lennon glasses”13; as Assef reaches the peak of his iniquitous career, so has Amir’s cipher of fear and evil, having grown and found substance in the form of Assef. Because of Amir’s cowardice, his problems have only augmented to the point where it may not be able to be solved. Hosseini demonstrates that this cowardice establishes an inability to fix the broken relationship between Hassan and Amir.

However, Hosseini not only incorporates an “evil” cipher, but also one that represents the platonic love between Amir and Hassan and how it is just as powerful as the marital love felt between husband and wife. Hosseini uses Soraya as a tool for Amir to connect with Hassan through marital rituals, such as the wedding ceremony in the novel. In the midst of the Afghan wedding dance, Amir remembers “wondering if Hassan too had married. And if so, whose face he had seen in the mirror under the veil? Whose henna-painted hands had he held?”14[[6]](#footnote-6)Even in such a sacred and rare moment of one’s life, Amir diverts his focus to his boyhood friend instead of his present wife. Rather than seeing Soraya as his wife, Amir views her as a portal to his thoughts of Hassan. Hosseini repeats the syntax of Amir’s inquiries of Hassan’s wedding to heighten the interest Amir holds for Hassan over his own well-being; Amir’s own wedding evokes such strong inquiries for “his other half”. However the questioning does not mention the wife of Hassan as whole, but rather uses synecdoche-her “hands” and “face”, to suggest that Amir cannot picture Hassan with another person to love than Amir, and therefore cannot empathize with Hassan due to selfish inquisition. Hosseini compares the wedding ceremonies of both Hassan and Amir to be similar in order to highlight the connotations of a wedding and the boys’ platonic love. Therefore, it is suggested that the boys’ childhood connection is so strong that it spills onto the relationships of other characters as the memories of the past only grow stronger in Amir’s future.

The post-modernistic and unreliable notion of memory in the novel is expanded by Hosseini’s various motifs to illustrate that this connection is not only affixed onto the novel’s characters. The fraternal bond takes shape in objects and concepts that are universal; the relationship, therefore, is unavoidable. Unquestionably, the most obvious motif Hosseini uses are “kites”15[[7]](#footnote-7). The symbol is introduced in the beginning of the novel to establish an umbilical connection between the two boys as they work together to win the annual kite flying competition in Kabul. The position each boy holds within the kite fighting parallels Amir and Hassan’s relationship throughout the novel; Amir is the fighter who controls the kite while Hassan is the “assistant”16 who “h(olds) the spool and fe(eds) the line.”16 Much like the master-servant bond, Hassan is the inferior of the two and does not directly associate himself within the action or glory. Rather, he is, by default, the observer and indirectly involved. Hassan is comparable to the anchor, or spool, sacrificing the chance to fly as the kite. However, readers may argue that even though the glory is given to Amir, it is also shared with Hassan, as Hassan is, in a way, part of Amir. Hosseini’s diction of “h(olds)” and “fe(eds)” can be linked to the Hassan’s servitude, “h(olding)” plates and “fe(eding)” his master. Therefore it is predictable, considering the symbolic significance of the novel’s title, that Hassan is also the “greatest kite runner…”17. A kite runner chases after “the last fallen kite”16 in the tournament, or “the most coveted prize…a trophy of honor.”16 Although chasing the kite follows the grand kite fighting event and is therefore considered the remnants of a more important competition, to Hassan, catching the fallen kite is an honor rather than a burden of rushing through a mob of other kite runners and risking injury. When the kite is obtained, however, the kite runner outruns the others and therefore is alone, marveling in a more private glory than the grand celebration the kite fighter experiences. Even more, the kite is then given back to the kite fighter, as Hassan’s sole objective is to provide Amir with the fallen kite, and therefore provide Amir with all of the glory, for “a thousand times over”18[[8]](#footnote-8). Hassan’s will to voluntarily subjugate himself below Amir’s status shows his eternal loyalty to Amir; readers feel a slight over-exaggeration to the dedication within the boys’ relationship illustrated by the obvious parallels of the kite motif, but these direct links are necessary for Hosseini to effectively demonstrate the brotherhood’s timelessness. The kite-fighting competition is a microcosm of the bond itself; although it may change, it will never dissipate as the event is a part of Afghani culture much like how, through memory, Hassan is a part of Amir.

The scars from kite-fighting support the idea of remembrance and a forever-present bond between Amir and Hassan. Hosseini describes “every boy in Kabul (bearing) telltale horizontal gashes (that) were reminders of a beloved season…”19. The remembrance from the connotation of scars in boyhood is one of pride from harmless conformity. However, the scars become less literal and more mental as the novel progresses. As Amir witnesses Hassan’s rape, the scars never “heal” as the experience traumatizes Amir for “the rest of (his) life”20. In this way, these mental scars were obtained alone and therefore the remembrance is no longer “beloved”, but a representation of horror and cowardice at not attempting to save his platonic love- his “other half”. Hosseini therefore strengthens the association of kites with the bond between the two boys, as he incorporates the motif in the beginning of the novel when Amir is an adult living in California. Years after the incident when Amir sees “a pair of kites”21[[9]](#footnote-9), he immediately remembers “Hassan’s voice whisper(ing)…’For you, a thousand times over’”22. Even in a drastically different country and culture from his childhood, Amir cannot escape his past or forget his bond, heightening the ongoing pain of loss through remembrance. Hosseini’s repetition of Hassan’s quote “For you, a thousand times over” effectively “remain(s) true to the book’s heart-tugging, sentimental power and sturdy, symmetrical storytelling”23in which the readers are emotionally manipulated and feel a sense of tragedy as this childhood phrase reminds the reader that even after Hassan’s death, his undying loyalty remains. Yet the overused, manipulative motif coincides more with a “clumsy melodrama”23 as the placement of the key phrase in the beginning and end of the novel is formulaic and therefore creates an artificiality in the sympathy felt for the characters. Nevertheless, Hosseini emphasizes the persistent bond between the two boys; although the brotherhood is disrupted through the boys’ maturity and separation, elements of the childhood bond still remain in memory.

Memory is distorted, however, in the motif of dreams as Hosseini links stressful events that Amir experiences with dreams of Hassan to suggest that the source of all stress originates from the broken brotherhood. Hosseini portrays Amir’s cowardice and unconscious desires to show the inability to escape from past memories, and therefore, from the brotherhood. Amir’s dreams are structured to include Hassan whenever Amir has just experienced a stressful situation, such as Rahim Khan’s illness, Soraya’s infertility, and the buildup to the rescuing of Sohrab. More than once does Amir “drift…to sleep (and) dream… of Hassan…yelling over his shoulder: ‘For you, a thousand times over!’”. Again, Hosseini repeats Hassan’s memorable quote; the overuse suggests that the phrase becomes trite and the relationship from the reader’s perspective, therefore, follows until it loses its initial “heart-tugging” connotation. The presence of Hassan is no longer precious to the continuation of the brotherhood, but rather a constant guilty reminder of the loss of Amir’s “other half”. This burden is heightened in Amir’s next dream to the point where Hassan is shot; his “knees…bleed through his pants as he rocks in prayer….”24 and Amir is “the man in the herringbone vest (who shoots Hassan).”25 Immediately, readers establish a connection between the “bleed(ing) through his pants” and the dripping blood after Hassan’s rape. However, Amir is no longer the observer, but the culprit of the crime; Amir unconsciously desires to kill Hassan and therefore kill the brotherhood, as he did when he caused Hassan to no longer serve Amir’s family. By killing the brotherhood, Amir is able to rid himself of his guilty past represented by Hassan. Therefore, readers sense that Amir’s intentions are selfish as he fails to face the pain of his broken bond, and instead tries to destroy the reminder of his loss while *he* is protected by a “herringbone vest”. Ultimately, Hosseini intends to portray the persistence of the bond in Amir’s awareness to the point where Amir wishes to kill off the emotional pain from childhood loss.

However, the readers only focus on the romanticised brotherhood between the two boys, as Hosseini’s clever, yet deceptively manipulative use of structure encourages the audience to evoke sympathy for Amir. Hosseini links present and past by incorporating one element of one event into another. Near the end of the novel, when Amir sees Sohrab dancing during the encounter with Assef, he compares “Sohrab’s eyes (to) slaughter sheep’s eyes…pleading.”26[[10]](#footnote-10)The “slaughter sheep eyes” hint at a direct relationship with Hassan’s rape, as Hassan also wore “the…resign(ed)…look of the lamb”27. By comparing the two events, past and present, Hosseini foreshadows a similar string of events from the rape to follow Sohrab’s dance, suggesting that there will be a crucial turning point in Amir’s life, as presented after the rape. The transition of Hosseini’s chosen diction “lamb” to the adult form, “sheep” also suggests that the severity of the situation has grown and become more dangerous, as Amir actually suffers an augmentation of mental pain from the witnessing of Hassan’s rape along with physical pain at this point in the novel. Therefore, Hosseini indirectly repeats the events of the novel to allow the readers to see a contrast in Amir’s actions; because he could not will himself to save Hassan in the beginning of the novel, Amir faces punishment for his cowardice through physical pain at the end, and therefore “fe(els) at peace…for the first time since the winter of 1975.”28 However, the “symmetrical storytelling”29 is too emotionally manipulative for readers to be aware of Hosseini suggesting that nothing has changed since the referenced moment in Amir’s childhood. Although Hosseini appears to portray Amir achieving personal catharsis, a physical punishment suffered as a man is an insufficient redemption for the loss of Hassan’s childhood innocence. Therefore, Hosseini’s “series of parallel”30 events is tantamount to a manipulative tool, convincing readers to sympathize over a false catharsis. Hosseini evokes sympathy for Amir through the intentional gap of emotional pain between the rape and the self-exoneration, structuring the plot to suggest that the character has dedicated his entire life to mend the broken bond between his “other half”. As a result, Hosseini uses verisimilitude to mirror Amir’s sense of false satisfaction from making amends with the reader’s empathy for the protagonist.

The timing of certain major events in the novel also acts as a technique to evoke powerful responses from the tragedy of the plot, strengthening the bond of the two boys’ through their losses, but also revealing the tenuousness of the boys’ “platonic love”. One of the most significant revelations in the novel is arguably the confirmation of Amir and Hassan’s biological brotherhood, as Hassan is Amir’s “illegitimate half brother.”31[[11]](#footnote-11)Hosseini reveals this crucial piece of knowledge near the end of the novel to add an element of surprise to an already climactic section of the plot. Therefore, the ending becomes more powerful as the readers are more emotionally attached to Amir’s plan to rescue Hassan’s son. As the mission becomes more personal to Amir, the readers also become more emotionally attached to the character, especially because the readers are drawn to his increased vulnerability from the “surprise”. The coincidental timing of yet another twist in the plot is a melodramatic attempt at gaining the bias of the reader in favor of Amir. Therefore, readers ignore the urge to question if the “surprise” is truly unexpected. Considering Hosseini’s constant mention of Hassan throughout Amir’s life, the unearthing of the boys’ biological brotherhood is arguably inevitable, or at least predictable to a reader not swayed by the emotionally provocative ending of the novel.

This bias towards the character is sustained until the very last chapter of the novel where Hosseini ends the narrative with another repetition of Hassan’s “For you, a thousand times over”32, but said by Amir, who then runs a kite, as Hassan used to as a child. The last scene is quite a stereotypical ending: the theme of “hope” is embellished where the protagonist has succeeded in attaining personal catharsis with potential development in the future, as demonstrated by Amir’s growing relationship with Sohrab, to leave the readers in the heat of interest. The final repetition of Hassan’s memorable quote signifies a change in the connotations of the context behind the phrase. The quote is no longer a burdensome reminder of Amir’s failure to return the same level of love as given by Hassan, but a celebratory declaration of freedom from Amir’s sinful past. The protagonist feels confident enough to say the quote aloud to Hassan’s son, as if Amir is indirectly speaking to Hassan himself. When considering the rest of Hosseini’s literary techniques, repetition is used as a tool for emotional manipulation. However, the growing triteness of the last phrase is diminished through the final repetition as it encompasses all the previous events of the novel, holding more meaning than the other repetitions. The placement of the line “for you, a thousand times over” at the novel’s end arguably evokes the strongest emotional response from the reader, and is therefore successful. Whether the relationship between Amir and Hassan is truly mended is up to the reader’s interpretation (i.e. a Western reader tends to hold a more cynical viewpoint than one from other cultural backgrounds) but it is clear through Hosseini’s depiction of Amir in this last chapter that he has achieved “the first flake melting”33[[12]](#footnote-12), or the beginning of personal catharsis.

**Conclusion**

Hosseini’s evocative style of writing ultimately sways the reader to feel certain emotions on behalf of Amir and Hassan’s persistent brotherhood. Hosseini strategically chooses his literary techniques, using ethnic context to set the base for the relationship, characterization to develop the bond, motif to ensure that this brotherhood is never forgotten in the minds of the reader, and structure to “bring the story full circle”30, or to combine all the other elements to leave the reader with a powerful overall feel for the novel. The use of characterization is the most effective literary technique in manipulating the reader; as Amir’s character is developed throughout the novel, readers feel sympathy in both his auspicious traits, and his faults. The imperfections of the protagonist give the impression that Amir is relatable (although perhaps not reliable), and therefore the character is favored by the audience. Other characters revolve around the conscious of Amir in which Hosseini uses them as tools to aid or hinder in Amir’s life-long goal to find himself through the loss of his “other half” and the supposed lost brotherhood. However, this initial connection between Amir and Hassan is never lost, as the relationship is built off the characterization of Soraya, Assef- ciphers to gain the emotional bias of the reader. Although the connection may not be resolved or mended, it is always present. Therefore, the purpose of the novel does not linger around Amir’s attainment of personal catharsis. Hosseini did not intend to resolve the broken relationship between the two boys, but to simply continue its presence throughout the novel as a realistic message in the story’s heavy melodrama: such a loss of one “brother” will not only eternally remain as a memento of the love from the childhood connection, but it will also persist as a painful reminder of the other brother’s inability to free himself from his sins- a reminder that “not even time c(an) break.”1

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4. 7 “[Genocide of Hazaras (1890 - 1905)](http://www.hazara.net/hazara/history/history.html) - Over 60% of Hazaras were killed during this campaign by Pushtun dominated Afghan Government. Hazara women and children were sold as slaves to the Pushtuns particapating in the blood bath as a reward.” <http://www.hazara.net/persecution/persecution.html>

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5. 10Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner,* New York: Riverhead Books, 2003, pg. 11

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11. 31 Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner,* New York: Riverhead Books, 2003, pg. 257

    32 Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner,* New York: Riverhead Books, 2003, pg. 401 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. 33 Khaled Hosseini, *The Kite Runner,* New York: Riverhead Books, 2003, pg. 401 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)